



# State, Society & Governance in Melanesia

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## A Watershed Moment, or Business as Usual? Female Candidates and Quota Implementation in the 2016 Samoan Election

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The 2016 general election was the first ever held in Samoa using a constitutionally mandated minimum guaranteed level of women's representation.<sup>1</sup> The 'safety net' gender quota meant that if fewer than five women were elected, additional women members of parliament (MPs) would be appointed to ensure there was a minimum of five. These additional members would be the highest-polling (by percentage) unsuccessful women candidates.

Was the 2016 election a turning point for women's representation in Samoa? While a record 24 female candidates contested, just four women MPs won their constituencies and were elected outright; this was double the number elected in the 2011 election, but equal to those elected in 2006. An additional woman MP subsequently entered parliament under the quota mechanism for a total of 10 per cent women's representation in the House, the highest in Samoan history, but far lower than the global average of 23 per cent (IPU 2016). One significant milestone in terms of women in politics occurred after the election, when Samoa's longest-serving female MP, Fiame Naomi Mata'afa, became the country's first female deputy prime minister. Thus the 2016 election, while not drastically altering the gender balance of Samoan politics, did result in some notable gains for women in politics, in establishing a baseline of ten per cent women's representation, and in the appointment of a woman to the second-highest position in the executive.

### Women in the Election

In the lead-up to the election a number of initiatives were implemented to encourage and support female candidates. The Increasing Political Participation of Women in Samoa Programme, led by the United Nations Development Programme and UN Women in partnership with the Government of Samoa and the Australian Government's Pacific Women program, ran a series of workshops promoting women's political participation as well as training

for female candidates. Local groups were also active in this space, including *Samoa Ala Mai* (Wake Up Samoa), a local advocacy group, which ran training with support from the United States embassy.

While the number of women who contested in 2016 was more than double the number that ran in the previous general election, men still made up over 85 per cent of the total number of candidates, and voters in only 12 of the 45 constituencies in which elections were held had the opportunity to vote for a woman.<sup>2</sup> While 47.8 per cent of the women who ran won less than 10 per cent of the vote,<sup>3</sup> the female candidates who ran in Samoa were on the whole more competitive than those who have contested some of the recent national elections in the Pacific islands region; in both the 2014 Solomon Islands election and the 2014 Tongan election, over 80 per cent of female candidates won less than 10 per cent of the vote.

### Women in the House

Four women were elected outright, including the three incumbent female MPs: Fiame, Gatoloaifaana Amataga Alesana Gidlow, and Faimalotoa Kika Iemaima Stowers. The fourth, Aliimalemanu Alofa Tuuau, won the seat of Alataua Sisifo from incumbent MP Lafaitale Patrick Leiataualesa. The additional seat in parliament allowed for in the constitution, which was allocated based on percentage vote share, was taken by Faaulusau Rosa Duffy Stowers, who contested against the incumbent speaker Laauli Leuatea Polataivao and won 35.5 per cent of the vote. The two new woman MPs are both high-profile figures, with Aliimalemanu previously holding a senior position in the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, and Faaulusau a former journalist and director of broadcasting. All five women elected to parliament were running as candidates for or affiliated to the ruling Human Rights Protection Party (HRPP).

Two women became cabinet ministers following the election, an increase on the last term when there was only one. Fiame, in addition to becoming deputy prime minister, has the environment portfolio, while Faimalotoa was appointed as Minister for Women and Social Affairs. Deviating from past practice whereby all HRPP MPs held associate ministerial portfolios, the prime minister chose to appoint only 13 associate ministers, all of whom are men.

### What Happens Next?

The new parliament of 50 members is the largest ever. The appointment of an additional female for the first time is sure to raise questions of the constituent responsibilities attached to that position. In this respect, however, Samoa is well used to constituencies with more than one member, with six dual-member constituencies split into 12 single-member constituencies before the 2016 election. In terms of the calculation for allocating the additional seats, contesting a smaller constituency appeared to be a significant advantage. Faaulusau, as well as the two next highest-polling women who did not win outright, were contesting in three of the smallest constituencies, all with less than 1600 registered voters.<sup>4</sup> Faaulusau also seemed to benefit from being one of only two candidates in Gagaifomauga Nu. 3, which reduced the possibility of vote splitting.

While the number of women ministers did increase, women now make up just 15 per cent of cabinet and hold no associate ministerial portfolios. Access to positions in the executive is a key determinant of the ability of female politicians to pursue substantive policy goals. Now that the proportion of women in parliament has risen, attention should be paid to the task of promoting women in political leadership. The appointment of Fiame as deputy prime minister — the first such political leadership position to be held by a woman in Polynesia — is a significant achievement in this respect.

In Samoa, only *matai* title holders are eligible to run for parliament. This requirement has gendered effects as only around one in ten *matai* are women. Furthermore, around ten villages do not allow women to hold *matai* titles. Given this disparity, proposals have been made to relax the title requirements for women in order to allow a greater pool of potential female candidates, but based on interviews I conducted this idea seems to have little support either within the government or among the general public. While the ratio of female to male *matai* is skewed, a significant number of women are still eligible to stand for parliament

(1766, according to 2011 figures).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, one in three women candidates in 2016 won more than 20 per cent of the vote in their constituencies, suggesting not only that many women candidates were highly competitive but also that many voters were prepared to cast their votes for women. While attempting to institute a wider eligibility pool may be a politically difficult task, it should be acknowledged that within the current eligibility pool are many accomplished women — including high-level public servants and prominent businesswomen — who for various reasons choose not to become political candidates. This raises the question of how to make the prospect of entering politics more attractive to female *matai*.

### Author Notes

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### Endnotes

- 1 For more on gender quota adoption in Samoa, see Baker (2014).
- 2 There were 49 constituencies overall, but four had only one nominated candidate, so in these cases MPs were elected unopposed; of these four MPs, three were men and one was a woman.
- 3 Eleven out of 23 women candidates; Fiame, who won her seat unopposed, is excluded from this statistic.
- 4 The size of constituencies in the 2016 Samoan election ranged from 763 registered voters in Lepa to 5092 in Faleata Sisifo; the average number of registered voters per constituency was 2365.
- 5 Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development, Apia, 2012, personal communication.

### References

- Baker, K. 2014. Explaining the Outcome of Gender Quota Campaigns in Samoa and Papua New Guinea. *Political Science* 66(1):63–83.
- IPU (Inter-Parliamentary Union) 2016. [Women in National Parliaments: Situation as of 1st May 2016](#).

